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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT URIBE APPOINTS FORMER FARC HOSTAGE AS
FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: BOGOTA 1169

Summary

¶1. On February 19, President Alvaro Uribe appointed Fernando Araujo Perdomo to replace Maria Consuelo Araujo (no relation) as Colombia's Foreign Minister. Fernando Araujo escaped from 6 years of FARC custody on December 31, 2006. Uribe said he appointed Araujo because he was a symbol of Colombians' suffering from generations of FARC violence. End summary.

Uribe Names Former FARC Hostage as Foreign Minister

¶2. On February 19, President Uribe appointed Fernando Araujo Perdomo as Colombia's new Foreign Minister. Araujo replaced Maria Consuelo Araujo (no relation), who resigned following allegations of her family's alleged links to paramilitary activities (reftel). On December 31, 2006, Fernando Araujo took advantage of a Colombian military assault on his FARC captors to escape after 6 years of being held as a FARC hostage in brutal jungle conditions. His survival after a five-day trek in the jungle, composure when meeting the press, and remarkable memory for detail made him an instant celebrity.

¶3. Uribe said he selected Araujo in part because he symbolized the "national tragedy" of violence that Colombians had suffered for generations. The international community would now have a more balanced view of Colombia's challenges and efforts to overcome them. Uribe claimed the appointment was already paying off, drawing attention to the grim reality of conflict with the FARC.

Announcement Surprises Media, Commentators

¶4. Uribe's announcement caught media commentators off guard, with most praising Araujo's intelligence and low key style. Leading daily El Tiempo said Araujo was eloquent and capable, and characterized him as a victim of the violence that had overwhelmed the country. Influential weekly magazine Semana said Araujo had passed from "hell to glory" in two months since he escaped from the FARC.

Araujo Vows Quick Study

¶5. In his first meetings with the press, Araujo acknowledged he lacked a foreign affairs background as well as detailed knowledge of recent international developments. Still, he said he was a quick study and would make every effort to promote Colombia's positive image in the world. He identified obtaining U.S. congressional approval of the bilateral free trade agreement and a continued strong U.S. assistance package as top priorities.

Bio Note

¶6. Araujo, 51, was born in Cartagena. His family are prominent industrialists in the city. Araujo earned his civil engineering degree from Javeriana University in Bogota, and served as a professor of civil engineering at the Jorge Tadeo Lozano University in Bogota and the University of Cartagena. Araujo served in several capacities in Cartagena public administration and ran unsuccessfully for mayor. He is a Conservative and a close friend of former president Andres Pastrana, who appointed Araujo as Minister for Development in August 1998. One year later, Araujo resigned following murky accusations that as a company director in 1996 he was associated with a fraudulent land deal involving the Cartagena City Council. He was arrested in 2000, released on bail, and absolved of criminal responsibility in ¶2003.

¶7. The FARC kidnapped Araujo in December 2000. His escape on New Year's Eve captivated Colombians. Araujo told of the appalling conditions he endured in the jungle and of how he maintained his physical fitness with daily exercises for 6 years in anticipation of an escape opportunity. Araujo's memory was almost encyclopedic in recounting the number of

steps from camp to camp, and he recalled dates and events with remarkable precision. Araujo's initial press conferences showed a gaunt and obviously undernourished hostage, but one whose mental strength and confidence were equally clear.

¶8. Araujo's son Luis Ernesto Araujo is a diplomat assigned to the Colombian Embassy in Washington, D.C. We understand he will be his father's private secretary in the Ministry. Araujo's second wife, Monica Aljure, remarried several years after Araujo was taken by the FARC. We expect Araujo to continue to promote close relations with the U.S. He does not speak English.

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